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Firm Has Bugging School

Chicago Sun-Times

CHICAGO—A subsidiary of the Chicago-based Bell & Howell Co. operated a wiretapping and bugging school for law enforcement officers, among them policemen from states where wiretapping is illegal.

Bell & Howell Communications Co., of Waltham, Mass., also sold sophisticated eavesdropping equipment to police agencies that cannot legally use the equipment, according to a federal wiretap commission.

The wiretap commission, which conducted hearings in Washington last summer, turned over to the Justice Department a stack of Bell & Howell sales vouchers reflecting purchases by police and other governmental units. The commission also sent prosecutors sales data on other manufacturers of electronic-eavesdropping equipment.

"We turned the information over because we discovered that a great number of police agencies possess a lot of equipment they legally had no right to possess," a commission source said in an interview.

The records were received by James Reynolds, who oversees prosecution of illegal wiretappers for the Justice Department. At his Washington office Reynolds said, "We are reviewing the voluminous records...to see if there are any criminal violations involved."

Bell & Howell's bugging and wiretapping schools first were described in a largely unnoticed hearing last June held by the national wiretap

commission, formerly known as the National Commission for the Review of Federal and State Laws Relating to Wiretapping and Electronic Surveillance. A company official, however, said wiretapping techniques no longer are taught at the schools and that it was decided in 1973 to discontinue manufacturing wiretapping equipment.

The schools have been operating since at least 1970, a company official confirmed. The schools are held four times annually.

A.T. Bower, manager of government sales for Bell & Howell Communications, said wiretapping techniques no longer are taught.

Bower told a reporter that his company now manufactures only electronic-surveillance kits—a unit that has a transmitter and a recorder in a briefcase. Such devices can be modified so they can also be used for wiretapping, he said.

Bower denied that the primary reason for the schools was to increase Bell & Howell's sales to government agencies. But, he conceded, it appeared that the company's sales had improved since the schools began in 1970.

Bell & Howell is the major supplier of electronic-surveillance equipment to police and other government agencies, according to the wiretap commission.